



Fandom and Critical Media Literacy

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Fandom and critical media literacy

Fandom of alternative popular
culture texts can be a route
to connecting students'
out-of-school lives to school
literacy practices.

As educators committed to advancing literacy practices, we have a great appreciation for the topic of reading. Our enjoyment of and commitment to reading are realized in the considerable time (and money) spent developing and cultivating our understanding and knowledge of the subject. On any given day, a dose of our reading habit may include a poetry reading to a class of students, a journal article and part of the newspaper during lunch, and a chapter of the latest best seller before retiring for the evening. This dedication to our reading practices may be proof that we appreciate literacy, but if we delve a little further into our own reading lives we realize that we not only appreciate reading but that we are fans of reading as well.

As reading lovers, we choose to belong to groups that hold reading in high regard. We may, for example, attend monthly book club meetings where we engage in book talks with others who share our reading interests. During the discussions, we acknowledge one another's reading preferences of particular authors and genres and argue against or agree with the thoughts of other members. Or, we may tune into the book club episodes of *Oprah* to learn about the text interpretation of strangers. In keeping with the desire of most fans to be with others like ourselves, we join national groups such as the International Reading Association (IRA) that encourage our reading endeavors. As members, we attend and present at conferences so that we can discuss trends in reading education with others

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who share our love of reading and also learn of the latest book titles on the shelves.

Personal artifacts attest to our behavior as well. In wallets we find well-worn library cards that are used on a weekly basis. If we are really hooked as readers, we may tout an Educators' Discount card from a chain bookstore that we use to purchase stacks of books amassed from our perusal of the aisles as we sip a cup of coffee. As reading fans who are technologically linked, we have Amazon.com bookmarked in our favorites folder on our computer for easy access to our individual, online book account for ordering 24 hours a day.

As fans of reading, we collect books too. We build classroom libraries and marvel at one another's complete sets of a particular author's works. To recruit others into our group of fans, we encourage our students to order books through monthly book clubs; and we use book points to purchase more books for our collection because, as we all know, no one can ever own enough books. We also attend book signings so that we can buy autographed copied of books, and, if truly fortunate, we have the author autograph a poster or book illustration. These treasures we frame and hang in our classrooms or offices for others to see.

We read, we converse with others, we collect—all because we have an affinity for reading. To characterize the nature of our practices in developing and honing this love, we would argue proudly that we are indeed fans of reading. But are we as accepting of other forms of fandom?

Fandom: What is it?

The popular consensus that fandom is a stigma—a label to be attached to adoring audiences that are passive and manipulated by the mass media—is a concept presently under attack (Lewis, 1992; Storey, 1996). No longer willing to submit to the popular notion that fandom is a pathology marked by a deviant and exaggerated commitment to some aspect of the music industry, cinema, television, or sports, defenders of fandom have begun to speak out. For example, the cultural studies theorist, Joli Jenson (1992), argued that fans are not suffering from a sense of psychological inadequacy when they seek to establish some form of contact between themselves and the world of celebrities. Nor are teenagers who attend rock concerts necessarily

in search of an illusory sense of community.

Rather, Jenson contended that the loyalties literacy educators feel to reading (or other teachers to their subjects, opera buffs to the opera, or gardeners to their horticultural societies) are no different from the loyalties adolescents feel toward objects of their affection. The difference between adolescents' fandom and our own, if there is any, lies in what counts as suitable tastes or preferences worth cultivating. In Jenson's words:

Fandom, it seems, is not readily conceptualized as a general or shared trait, as a form of loyalty or attachment.... Fandom, instead, is what they do; we, on the other hand, have tastes and preferences, and select worthy people, beliefs and activities for our admiration and esteem. Furthermore, what they do is deviant, and therefore dangerous, while what we do is normal, and therefore safe. (p. 19)

Drawing lines of demarcation between topics that adolescents find appealing to read, write, and talk about in our classes and those that adults find worthy of taking up school time is a counterproductive pedagogical practice. For as Jenson (1992) went on to argue, when we stigmatize the fandom of particular segments of our society (e.g., adolescents' loyalties to their favorite bands, musical recording artists, or celebrities of other kinds), we are cutting ourselves off from understanding how meaning is enacted and shared among members of those particular groups.

A better strategy for viewing fandom, and one that serves as the purpose of this article, is to remain open to the possibility of welcoming certain aspects of adolescent fan culture into the school curriculum. Exploring fandom with students may bring about insights into how students construct meaning from their personal interests and provide teachers with a window through which to view students' constructed identities. Along with this welcoming of fandom in the classroom would also come, we hope, an interest in critical media literacy instruction. An important premise in teaching critical media literacy is that teachers focus on respecting the pleasures adolescents experience as fans while simultaneously engaging them in a deeper understanding (through various reading, writing, speaking, and listening activities) of what it means to be a fan of a certain person, group, or object (Luke, 1997).

Why music and fandom?

In this article, we focus on a particular kind of fandom—that of adolescents and their musical preferences. Music infiltrates their lives in many contexts: at home, in shopping malls, and on the go. Cars come equipped with radios as well as compact disk and cassette players so that listeners may play music of their own choosing. However, in most of these contexts, middle and high school students are not the primary selectors of the music played. Perhaps this helps explain why 90% of American seventh- through twelfth-grade students have radios in their bedrooms and, of that group, 60% have their own stereos (Davies, 1996). Music video channels and musical scores from Hollywood films offer still other dimensions of the popular music scene beyond the radio that adolescents partake of on a daily basis—a scene that may have originated in the United States, but one that Kellner (1995) believed was invading cultures all over the world, producing new forms of the *global popular* (p. 5, emphasis in the original).

How can we as literacy educators assist adolescents in developing their literacy practices and affective sensibilities toward the music they appreciate and follow as well as develop within ourselves a better understanding of the students that we teach? One way, we believe, is through acknowledging young people's interest in music and inviting them to bring this interest into the classroom. By connecting adolescent musical fandom in all its many forms to critical media literacy, we believe teachers can become instrumental in assisting students' engagement in the complex multiliteracies that they are encountering as we enter the 21st century. Put another way, we believe that connecting adolescents' musical fandom to critical media literacy is a timely project—one that moves us forward in our thinking toward what *JAAL* Editors Allan Luke and John Elkins (1998) referred to as the need for "reinventing literacy in 'New Times'" (p. 4).

One view of fandom and reading

According to cultural theorist John Storey's (1996) assessment of what fan culture involves, "Fandom is not just about consumption, it is also about the production of texts—songs, poems, novels,

fanzines, videos, etc.—made in response to the professional media texts of fandom" (p. 127). Storey drew on the thinking of de Certeau (1984) and Jenkins (1992) in making his argument for viewing fandom and reading as anything but textual determinism, where the text is seen as positioning the reader in a particular ideological discourse. Instead, Storey argued that "fans do not just read texts, they continually reread them" (p. 128), and it is in this rereading that a reader's experience of a text is altered. According to Storey, "rereading thus shifts the reader's attention from 'what will happen' to 'how things happen,' to questions of character relations, narrative themes, the production of social knowledges and discourses" (p. 128).

As former public school teachers, we see implications in Storey's (1996) views on reading and fandom for teaching critical media literacy at the middle and high school levels. Before drawing such implications, however, we offer vignettes of two adolescents whose teachers involved them in literacy assignments that integrated music fan culture into the existing curriculum. One of the adolescents, Sarah Gosling, attended school in Ontario, Canada; the other, Max Stahl, is a high school student in Athens, Georgia, USA.

Sarah's story

We became acquainted with Sarah Gosling through an e-mail posting that one of our colleagues, Gwynne Ash, came across while browsing the Web in search of some news on her own musical interests. Here is Sarah's response to Margaret's request to use portions of Sarah's interpretation of "What a Good Boy" (Page & Robertson, 1996) by the Canadian musical group Barenaked Ladies in a conference presentation at the 1999 IRA meeting in San Diego.

Ms. Hagood, I'm very flattered that you would want to use my interpretation at the conference and you have my full permission to do so. I live in Ontario, Canada and am in gr. 13 (we have 5 year high school). I was in grade 11 when I was given the assignment and I received a 95% on it. The assignment was to find five poems or songs on a common theme by the same person. We simply had to interpret each song individually and explain how it related to the topic (mine was "uncertainty"). The other songs I chose were "These Apples,"

“Great Provider,” “When I Fall,” and “Straw Hat and Old Dirty Hank.” If you would like me to email you anything I wrote about them I could do so, however my best one by far was the interpretation of “What a Good Boy” which has been my favorite song since I was 12 years old. Also, in the past couple of years I have noticed that the song could also refer to homosexuality. The way it talks about gender roles and forbidden love (“I know that it isn’t right”) DEFINITELY suggests that that could be a possible interpretation. I’m very happy to be of help to you and I’d be interested in hearing how the conference went. Thank you very much. Sarah Gosling

Although every effort was made to contact Sarah and request her approval for further use of her writing, we were not successful. Full credit for this material does belong to Sarah. The interpretation of “What a Good Boy” that Sarah alluded to in her message to Margaret is quite lengthy. In order to conserve space, we share here only portions of writing that she posted to the Song Interpretation section of a Barenaked Ladies Web site, <http://www.cgocable.net/~mejaskim/bnl/opinion/Gordon/WhatAGoodBoy.html>.

June 4th, 1998. This is going to be really long, but it was part of a school project I did where we had to interpret lyrics of five songs by the same artist. Oh, and there may be a bit of fluff that I put in for a better mark but just ignore that! (I got a 95%, so I think it’s OK!) “What a Good Boy” is one of my favorite songs by Barenaked Ladies. The song is basically about the fact that society imposes gender roles, and an unspoken rule of how people are supposed to act. These are imposed from birth and no one can get away from how they are expected to act. The uncertainty in this song (my theme was uncertainty, just so you know!) is not clearly defined, but I see it as being the inner turmoil felt by the narrator, questioning his beliefs and principles, and not being able to do anything about how he feels. It is not clear exactly what the inner turmoil is about, however, I read a comment by Steven Page himself in which he said that he wrote the song to be fairly open to anybody’s interpretation of what the conflict could be about. The first verse, though it sounds cute and complimentary upon first hearing it, is actually quite discriminating. It says, basically that society expects everyone to be good and smart. On top of that, boys should always be strong, and girls should always [be] pretty. Note that

the verse begins with “When I was born, they looked at me and said” meaning that these stereotypes are established at birth, before anyone has a chance to develop their own personality, therefore being restricted to behave within certain parameters. The next verse begins with “We’ve got these chains that hang around our neck,/people want to strangle us with them before we take our first breath” again, signifying that the “chains” of people’s expectation are present all of the time. The strangling occurs when anyone strays from the boundaries of normalcy and become outcasts from society. People know that being different is “wrong” because the beliefs of what is normal and what is not are instilled in people from birth onwards.... The second verse is then repeated again, but the line “When temptation calls” is left unfinished, which leads me to believe that the narrator may just be considering giving into the temptation to break away from society’s stereotypes and expectations and have a little fun. Of course we don’t know for sure, but the openendedness was a nice touch. The song finishes with the first verse again, and we are left thinking of how true these stereotypes are, and how society imposes expectations on us all “before we take our first breath.” But the sad thing is, nobody really wants to change it.

Max's story

After reading Sarah’s interpretation of a song that she had expressed being a fan of since she was 12 years old, we were curious as to what other adolescents closer to home were listening to, and whether or not teachers in our hometown of Athens, Georgia, were finding ways to welcome students’ musical interests into their classrooms. To find answers to our questions, we invited Max Stahl, the 15-year-old son of one of our colleagues, Steven Stahl, to join us for an evening of pizza and discussion about his musical tastes. What follows are a series of excerpts from an extended interview that lasted over 2½ hours and involved Max playing some music, which he had written, on his acoustic guitar. He also invited us to listen to a piece that he had composed electronically using a synthesizer in a software program on his computer. After the interview session, Max continued to communicate with us by e-mail. Where relevant, portions of these e-mail communications are also included.

Max's definition of a fan. When asked what it would take for him to say that he was a fan of some recording artist or band, Max elaborated in great detail why he doesn't see that label fitting his interest in music. His reasons seemed to center mostly on tastes in music, as indicated here:

Margaret: So you're saying people who are fans, even if they are boring, what are they fans of?

Max: Mostly they're fans of, of uh, music and bands that I absolutely can't stand....

Margaret: Like whom?

Max: I have a lot of problems with prefabricated rock bands and pop bands like um, I have a problem with the Spice Girls, and I have a problem with 'N Sync, and I have problems with the Backstreet Boys, and um, 98 Degrees....

Margaret: Do you have friends who listen to these bands?

Max: I do. I have acquaintances who listen to those bands. I have some friends who listen to them, and I tolerate that just because they're my friends, and they have other aspects about them that I enjoy their company anyway....

Margaret: And how do you—I guess I wonder how they behave that makes you identify them as fans?

Max: I think part of fandom, if you will, would be just, um, paraphernalia that goes along with the band. I mean, I have...a few bumper stickers that identify me as a person who enjoys listening to certain types of musical events but I don't plaster my room with them.... And, um, my bookbag over there [gesturing toward his bag] is clean of any sorts of buttons or anything. These people [those he identifies as fans] are exactly the other side of that. They're not—it's not—subtle at all. It's blatantly obvious....

Margaret: And so do you lump all of those together?

Max: Usually, yes.

Margaret: All right. So those are there, what's over here? [gesturing with her hands].

Max: Over here is the stuff that actually took time, and it took thought, and it took actual musical ability to create. Like stuff where there are people who actually play instruments or do something that you could call them musicians....

Margaret: [drawing on previous knowledge of Max's tastes in music that we learned through e-mail with him prior to the interview] Well, now, if I were to say, Max, you're a fan of Led Zeppelin, how would you react?

Max: I would almost say that you're right, but I wouldn't say that I'm a fan to the extent that I wouldn't enjoy or I wouldn't listen to anything else....

Margaret: So would you, um, go about learning more about Led Zeppelin's music and how to play Led Zeppelin tunes?

Max: Well, I've done—I've done enough of that—trying to play them. Or at least I've attempted to. It's difficult. You listen to it on the album and it sounds so easy, and then you actually try it yourself and it takes you weeks just to get moderately good at playing one song. And also it's difficult because they use a lot of weird nonstandard guitar tunings.

We came to understand from these conversations that Max's enjoyment of music stemmed from his affinity for playing musical instruments, namely the guitar, as contrasted to other types of fans who appreciate music solely as listeners and not as fellow musicians. Although reticent to call himself a fan of any one particular band, artist, or genre of music, Max explained that he admired artists such as Jimi Hendrix and Led Zeppelin because they were good musicians, and tried to emulate their work by both playing their songs and adapting their songs to compose his own musical scores. Max's construction of himself as a fan, then, was more one of his appreciation of the musical abilities of the forerunners of classic rock guitar playing as it fit within his conception of being a good musician, but not necessarily tied to being a fan of a particular artist or band. As a musician himself, Max, therefore, is a fan of music, using his own experiences of the difficulty of playing and composing good music to guide his judgment of his musical tastes. His interest in various groups and their musical compositions assist in his developing guitar playing abilities.

Max's description of an assignment that tapped his interest in music. In our interview with Max, we learned that Mr. F., his literature teacher, had shared some of his own musical interests with Max. This intrigued Max, who then proceeded to tell us of an

instance in which Mr. F. gave the class an assignment that required students to bring their musical tastes into the classroom:

Max: There was a project in literature class where we selected works of art, or works of music, and various things from different kinds of media that we thought represented ourselves.

Donna: Who did you...

Max: I don't know why I actually selected Pink Floyd because I don't really think it represents me or anything. I just really, really like it. It was a fantastic work called "Be Careful with that Axe, Eugene," and it was just, it was weird—that's the word for it. About 2 minutes into the song, you hear this guy—I assume it was Syd Barrett—whispering into the microphone, 'Be careful with that axe, Eugene,' and then there's just a woman screaming that lasts almost the rest of the song.... And what I really was amazed by that song was just the way that, the way that everything built up before that...a few bars beforehand, I mean, everything was kind of relaxed...then it just starts building up really fast...and it stays there. Somehow throughout the whole 12 minutes of the song, you sit there and you're listening to it, and you're completely transfixed. And that's partly because it's almost entirely a guitar solo....

Donna: Um, as a student in Mr. F.'s class, do you know what his purpose was in giving that assignment?

Max: Uh, I think he actually explained it to me once. I think I completely forgot what he said. But I think his actual aim in doing the assignment was, was perhaps so that the people would actually look inside themselves and see what their interests were, really, and try to define themselves. It was called a self-definition project....

Max's account of shared interests between his teachers and himself. Max continued to relate how he had discovered that Mr. F. and he shared similar interests in music. He told us that his teacher writes for the *Flagpole*, a local paper that features the music scene in Athens. He also described his physics teacher as someone who was willing to talk about music at school.

Margaret: Max, is that, is that something that happens a lot at school—sharing of interests? I mean...between teachers and students?

Max: Not really...because there aren't a lot of teachers that are really willing to share their musical tastes.... A lot of teachers are so bent upon, um, upon the academics that all they're really willing to do is just teach students.... They're not really willing to become friends with students or really share anything with them. My physics teacher listens to a lot of music. Some of it I haven't heard of, and he's gotten me sort of interested in it. And he listens to a tremendous amount of the Allman Brothers, and he, himself, used to play in a band. He used to play country. He never really liked country, but he appreciated the money that it brought him, and he's actually a lot better than I am, and he considers himself a mediocre guitarist.

Max reflects further on his musical tastes. For 5 days after the interview with Max, we continued to receive e-mail messages from him that were reflections on his musical tastes. Here, we share several of these messages, our responses to him, and exchanges between the two of us as we tried to make sense of what we were learning.

Date: Fri., 2 Apr 1999 18:58:53 EST

From: Max Stahl

Subject: Re: Max et al.

I don't think that the music I'm listening to right now entered the discussion [last evening]. DJ Shadow is, perhaps, one of the few early techno/early rap artists that I deeply admire. His slow, walking drum rhythms are truly interesting, and that's the only instrument he plays, all the other instruments are sampled from old records. Normally I'm not in favour of sampling (Puff Daddy is a grand example of a bad samplst), but DJ Shadow's persistent rhythm and harmony of composition swayed me in the end. See also De La Soul, PM Dawn, and Public Enemy.

Date: Sat., 3 Apr 1999 11:08:24 EST

From: Margaret Hagood

Subject: Max et al.

Donna, I find it interesting that Max, as an appreciator/fan of music, distinguishes between his idea of good music and poor music. Much of what he thinks is poorly produced music is considered

popular by others. For instance, he does not like 'N Sync, 98 Degrees, Backstreet Boys, Spice Girls, or Puff Daddy, for that matter. His interests are more obscure. He was impressed by his lit teacher's knowledge of and appreciation for the Dead Kennedys (an off-the-beaten track punk group) and he likes the work of Beck and R.E.M.'s old stuff but does not like the more mainstream R.E.M. stuff (didn't he mention something about his distaste for R.E.M. when it moved from the alternative section in the record store to the popular section?) It is sort of the same argument that Madonna uses against Courtney Love. This is the distinction between musical production for the masses (considered by appreciators as music for fans) and "real" artists' work (appreciated by those who have a cultivated understanding of the music industry).

Date: Tue., 6 Apr 1999 17:25:16 EDT
From: Donna Alvermann
Subject: Re: BNL

Max, if you have time, we'd like to get your "take" on BNL (Barenaked Ladies) as a musical group. Are you familiar with them? Where do they fit into your schema for things musical?

Date: Tue., 6 Apr 1999 21:37:22 EDT
From: Max Stahl
Subject: Re: BNL

My sister listens to a lot of BNL, so I have heard enough of their stuff to form an opinion. Well, now that I think of it, maybe not. Perhaps the reason why I'm so specific in my musical tastes is because I like the feeling that music gives you. I like music that makes you fly, makes you swim in lagoons of isles you've never visited before, takes you places. I try to make my music do that, but it rarely works. I mean, you take the odd rhythms of "Sunrise" and the improvised themes of "Sunset" [two pieces that Max had composed and played for us on his acoustic guitar] and you get a basic image that goes with them. I think perhaps the best way for me to present my music would not be with lyrics, but with accompanying poetry, because that's the only way I can describe them—especially my techno pieces, which are all inspired by dreams. I listen to Pink Floyd because it speaks to me somehow; the slow, rhythmic procession of instrumentation fills my brain with so many interesting thoughts, it's difficult to process them all. And then I listen to something like "Embryonic Journey" (Jorma Kaukonen, Jefferson Airplane) and it's the same

thing. The feeling evoked by "Embryonic Journey" is, as it should be, a journey (though I would scarcely call it embryonic). Stephen Pinker (no matter how much I do hate the man as a supposed expert on neuroscience) said that it is impossible to describe a subjective experience (like music) because it has to be re-encoded multiple times before becoming language. This, as I find out whenever I try to describe music, is very very true. The closest thing I can say is that Pink Floyd's music is more incantive than Jefferson Airplane's (or at least it was during Syd Barrett's day), or that Man or Astroman? is more frantic than the Beach Boys. I'm not entirely sure what I was trying to say there, but I'm sure it'll help you a bit.

Although Max may not have identified himself as a fan, his interest in music and his discerning taste could be characterized as fandom. As one who appreciated music that was more alternative or classic than popular, he sought the company of others who shared his specific musical interests, like his literature and physics teachers, and who had introduced him to several bands unknown to Max. By conversing with others with similar musical preferences, Max has been able to cultivate and broaden his musical knowledge of less well-known musicians, which to him seemed very important.

Max's musical pleasures stem from his interest in listening to instrumental texts he considers well written, unlike Sarah whose love of music seems more connected to actively reading and interpreting lyrical texts. Max is not as interested in lyrics; instead, he is more interested in the feelings that accompany listening to the instrumentation of his musical preferences. Instrumental music connects with Max's sense of self and is a venue for experiencing pleasure. Through instrumental texts, Max experiences deep emotional responses as noted in his e-mail describing his love of music as having the capacity to make him fly or take him away. Even in his self-definition project, Max chose a 12-minute song by Pink Floyd because he was moved by its lengthy guitar solo. That solo was more important to him than either the title or the lyrics.

Complicating the notion of a unified audience

Just as Bourdieu (1979/1984) has written about how people's tastes function as markers of their social class status, so too do words such as *appre-*

ciation and *fandom* serve to demarcate high-brow from low-brow tastes in music. This kind of dichotomous thinking is problematic because it privileges the pleasures of one group while it discounts the pleasures of another. As Frith (1996b) explains though, all fans discriminate based on what they judge as valuable. In his words, “people bring similar questions to high and low art, [such] that their pleasures and satisfactions are rooted in similar analytic issues, similar ways of relating what they see or hear to how they think and feel” (p. 19). Although differences exist perhaps between the forms and productions of high- and low-culture texts, all people keen on particular kinds of music, whether they deem themselves fans, aficionados, or appreciators critique and comment on the work of their favorite artists and groups. Just as fans of Mozart’s concertos may critique a particular symphony’s performance of Mozart’s work, fans of popular music also judge the merit of the work of those whom they admire.

All too often though, the separation of high-culture musical interests (Mozart, Wagner) from low-culture musical interests (Led Zeppelin, Barenaked Ladies) gives the impression that adolescents—viewed collectively as belonging a particular age group that consumes low-culture texts—share the same musical interests as fans. However, as seen between the musical interests of Max and Sarah (two adolescents close in age) fans of music, especially contemporary music, may have very differing tastes, desires, interests, and reasons for choosing their music. Further, not only do adolescents have differing musical preferences within the category of contemporary music, but they also view themselves differently in terms of the kinds of fans that they choose to be in relation to those texts.

For Max, considering himself as a fan of anything was difficult to do. Although he came close to acknowledging that he was a fan, he felt that the term was too constricting and was not inclusive of his varied interest in music. He discussed different types of fans but had difficulty placing himself within that construction. He saw himself as an appreciator of music but not as a fan of it. To him, being a fan connoted “strange images of groupies” as a “particular species” of fans who were committed to following the work of one

artist or band. He did not identify with this type of fandom because he felt it limited his options for appreciating several artists’ work. Describing a different type of fandom, he said, “you have people who aren’t groupies that admire people like Jimi Hendrix...because they’re good musicians and they occasionally try to emulate them.” Max seemed to include himself in this latter group.

On the other hand, Sarah may be less discriminating than Max in her construction of self as a fan of a particular band. She very much considers herself a fan of Barenaked Ladies and openly expresses her interest and pleasures in the song “What a Good Boy.” Over the years, Sarah has enjoyed making meaning from the same artists’ work. Revisiting this song over time, she has read and reread the text and in the process constructed new meanings from it.

Max and Sarah come at their musical interests from very different perspectives yet they both share aspects of fandom that capitalize on their pleasures experienced from reading those texts. Each could argue that the other’s personal musical interests constitute a kind of fandom. Bringing these different kinds of fandom together for discussion may provide a richer perspective for understanding both the various kinds of pleasures derived from fandom and the kinds of judgments made of others outside our own fan base about the objects of their affection.

However, bringing aspects of fandom into the classroom and only discussing with students their own personal pleasures derived from these texts leaves all of us where we are and does not acknowledge the various aspects of fandom and texts that may be read from different positions. It is this practice—reading from different positions—that is a component of critical media literacy and that allows for deeper understanding and meaning making. Implementing critical media literacy instruction in conjunction with musical fandom may get at these conceptions of judgments made about fandom and high and low culture issues; it may also get at the political undertone emanating from the heart of the matter.

Implications for teaching

Approaches to teaching critical media literacy using students’ interests in music typically fall along a

continuum that requires teachers to negotiate issues surrounding the politics of pleasure and audience (Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999). Briefly stated, these issues have to do with learning about, acknowledging, and helping students explore pleasures in music in ways that will open possibilities for positioning themselves (and ourselves) differently as a consequence of being exposed to other materials. For example, introducing new readings of the lyrics or instrumentation of a song without dismissing the pleasures students have already formed is one approach to teaching students to develop a critical perspective toward objects of their fandom. Important to bear in mind with this approach, however, is the fact that students may develop critical positions that differ from the ones we, as teachers, might like them to form.

As Sarah explained in her interpretation of the song "What a Good Boy," readings of this musical text may incite multiple interpretations from students about gender and sexuality. Discussions about various meanings of the text as related to these concepts may lead students to be critical of particular kinds of orientation that marginalize others in the process. Teachers must realize that critical media literacy practices recognize both students' pleasures and their critiques of the texts, but these practices also remain bound to a pedagogy of responsibility whereby teachers must negotiate these malleable yet influential spaces so that no voice is privileged over any other.

Encouraging adolescents to engage in parody and imitation is another approach to helping them use what they currently know as fans of a particular music genre, artist, or group to grow in their understanding of what attracts them to the object(s) of their fandom (Buckingham, 1998; Lewis, 1998). As some of the recent literature on teaching critical media literacy using popular culture forms (Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1998; Buckingham, 1998) has pointed out, adolescents' imitation of their favorite recording artists and bands does not necessarily mean that they are mindlessly reproducing the ideology that we as teachers are trying to get them to understand better from other positions. It is through this kind of safe imitation, or what looks to be imitation, that adolescents may actually be trying on new positions and identities that they had only imagined previously. As Hall and Whannel (1990) explained, identifying with

and trying on these various identities may allow youths to construct mental images of possibilities of being within the world.

When Max played for us on his guitar, he chose segments of several songs by Jimi Hendrix, Pink Floyd, Led Zeppelin, and R.E.M. He explained while playing these segments that he had spent a considerable amount of time listening to, learning, and practicing works by these very accomplished guitar artists. Jimi Hendrix, Max noted for our benefit, used much improvisation when he played solos because he did not have any formal schooling in music theory. And, at a later point in Max's performance, when playing R.E.M.'s song "Man on the Moon," he would stop at certain points in the song telling us why he liked that particular segment of musical text.

Following his performance of others' work, Max played for us some of his own music. In keeping with his interest in the instrumentation, he had not composed any accompanying lyrics. While playing his original scores "Sunrise" and "Sunset," he explained that he adapted a section from "Man on the Moon" to compose the "Sunrise" movement of his work and that he intentionally did not finish the second movement, "Sunset," so that he could play it differently each time. Playing his composition in this manner allowed Max to parody Jimi Hendrix's improvisation method throughout the second movement of his song. Thus, as a form of parody, Max used the work of artists whom he admired to compose his own musical texts. Parody, then, "can function as a critical mode in its own right, which provides access to the parts that more closed forms of analysis cannot reach" (Buckingham, 1998, p. 70). As teachers interested in critical media literacy, we need to view imitation and parody as avenues for involving students as fans while simultaneously helping them to tease out the pleasures of their fandom in ways that cause them to learn from such experiences.

Still another approach to teaching critical media literacy using adolescents' interests in music involves developing their understanding that while a particular taste in music is inevitably "an effect of social conditioning and commercial manipulation" (Frith, 1996a, p. 120), it is still explainable to the self as something special. Max's insistence that he is an appreciator (but not a fan) of classic rock music is a good example of how one's individual,

or special, taste in music is an experience of identity. Having said this, room still exists for exploration of how different tastes in music work materially “to give people different identities, to place them in different social groups” (Frith, 1996a, p. 124). A rationale for such exploration can be found in Bourdieu’s (1979/1984) contention that people, consciously or not, use judgments about cultural tastes to legitimate social class distinctions. Bourdieu’s argument is key to teaching students about critical media literacy.

For example, one way that Sarah’s and Max’s teachers might have used Bourdieu’s (1979/1984) argument to draw attention to how distinctions in cultural tastes serve to maintain social inequalities would have been to follow up on their original assignments that had to do with self-identity. Sarah’s teacher might, for instance, have engaged her in a more in-depth look at the patterns of production and consumption underlying the popularity of Barenaked Ladies, while Max’s teacher might have questioned him about the distinctions he drew between music appreciation and fandom. Because we were not present in either class, we cannot say for sure that follow-up activities similar to the ones we suggest were not done. However, judging from what Max told us, his teacher focused the one assignment solely on self-identity as it related to a themed literature unit on the same topic. And Sarah’s e-mail message seems to indicate that the class assignment ended when students had successfully interpreted five songs that related to their self-chosen themes (Sarah’s being “uncertainty”).

Bringing together fandom, music, and critical media literacy in classrooms may open up new opportunities for the classroom context to be a site of active meaning making by both teachers and students using a variety of popular culture texts. Using fandom of popular cultural texts such as music to explore these multiple meanings may be a way to get students interested in school literacy practices while providing teachers with insight into students’ out-of-school lives. According to Jenkins (1992), fan reading and rereading of texts allows for a social context to be formed where multiple interpretations and understandings of a text are discussed, which enhances meaning and furthers understanding. He explained that discussions of texts

expand the experiences of the text beyond its initial consumption. The produced meanings are thus more fully integrated into the readers’ lives and are of a fundamentally different character from meanings generated through a casual and fleeting encounter with an otherwise unremarkable (and unremarked upon) text. (p. 45)

Fandom as a construct of pleasure may be a way of tapping students’ interests in exploring the critical literacy practices needed for the 21st century, for as Frith (1996a) explained, “musical pleasure is never just a matter of feeling; it is also a matter of judgement” (p. 115). Pleasures are both a pathway for teachers to learn about and understand students’ fandom as well as an avenue for inquiry into multiple readings of texts from various positions.

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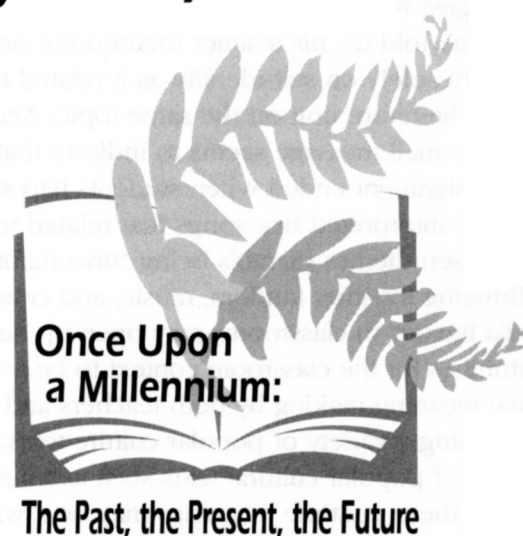
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